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ABSTRACT

Although communication scholars have given little attention in the past to researching and consulting in educational institutions, the consulting prospects for the coming decade are excellent for this type of work. The demographic and economic changes occuring in educational organizations will have dramatic effects on their management and communication practices. However, the person interested in consulting or conducting communication research in educational organizations must be aware of the unique differences between educational and industrial/governmental/service organizations and their implications for the consulting/research relationship. These differences are most acute at three points in the relationship with client: entering the organizataion, collecting data within the organization, and formulating change strategies within the organization. (Author/FL)

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Although communication scholars have given little attention in the past to researching and consulting in educational institutions, the consulting prospects for the coming decade are excellent for this type of work. The demographic and economic changes impacting educational organizations will have dramatic effects on their management and communication practices. This paper reviews the prognosis for the future in educational organizations and outlines the significant communication tasks to which management will be attending. The person interested in consulting or conducting communication research in educational organizations must be aware of the unique differences between educational and industrial/governmental/service organizations and their implications for the consulting/research relationship. These differences are most acute at three point in the relationship with the client: entering, data collecting and change strategizing. Each of these areas is discussed in detail with examples drawn from actual experiences.

The intricate complexities of educational institutions are natural areas of investigation for the communication researcher. However, they are a virtually ignored type of organization except for the occasional anecdotal or segmental study. To date only three known comprehensive communication audits have been completed on a campus.[1] Hopefully, this paper will encourage greater interest in pursuing comprehensive studies of this type of institution.

The focus of this paper is to describe the consulting prospects for post-secondary educational organizations and to define some of the problems encountered when consulting within them. Anyone interested in these consulting endeavors must be aware of three areas of unique differences between educational and industrial, governmental, or service organizations. These areas (entering, data collecting, and change strategizing) are discussed as points of departure for better understanding consulting in this particular type of organization. The one constraint is that this presentation is limited to the researcher and change agent but not the trainer. The particularly unique role of trainer in educational institutions is left for a later discourse.

The Need for Communication Consultants

The prospect for consultation in educational organizations is good and effective consultants are needed. In John Millett's review of campus governance in the decade after 1965, he noted that in that period "probably the most important single contribution of campus-wide governance was its encouragement of more extensive communication within the academic community."[2] In the half decade since then, the importance of communication has continued to increase. The forthcoming decade bespeaks of even more change and heightened priority for communication.

The changes facing higher education are expected to be dramatic within this next decade. Most of these changes are related to anticipated financial problems arising from the combined effects of declining enrollments and inflationary pressures. The projections for enrollment generally indicate a decline in admissions through 1984 and possibly 1990. The difference in time is related to the continuing cummulative impact of a successively smaller proportion of high school graduates electing to enter college.

Inflation also erodes the financial base of the campus. Like most "businesses," colleges and universities have increasing costs and limited opportunities for cost reductions or income expansion. Unlike most businesses, colleges are highly labor-intensive thereby restricting the flexibility to engage in cost-cutting or resource reallocating. Too often, the only perceived choice is to increase income. Yet, endowments are already eroded by inflationary pressures. Tax-funded resources are constantly being challenged and often a favorite political target for cuts. Recent examples in California and Pennsylvania are sufficient evidence of the vagaries of state funding. Recent reviews of federal funds (a source colleges are depending on in alarmingly increasing amounts) further threatens fiscal planning in higher education.

The erosion of the financial core element brings a host of consequential problems for administrators. The disruption of normal decision-making and the added uncertainty in information obtained strikes college administrators who have, for the most part, lived through two successive decades of growth. It is quite literally true that this country has less than a handful of administrators who have developed leadership skills for dealing with educational systems entering periods of decline or even stability. Managing either is very different from managing periods of growth.

The consultant enters the arena with talents, knowledge, and skills useful to the administrator in assessing the system's ability to acquire, utilize, and disseminate the information needed for effective decision-making and for leadership. The communication consultant who, for the most part, comes from the academy is often in an unique position to provide the effective comprehensive consultation needed.

In the coming decade, the ability to assess the communication system in a comprehesive system in a comprehensive manner will be critical to the major tasks higher education institutions will face. There are at least four major tasks that can be identified: academic planning, resource allocation or reallocation, personnel decisions, and legal responsibilities. Each requires that the communication system provide quality information (timely, adequate, accurate, and useful) to the appropriate decision-maker. In turn the decision-maker must be able to articulate in an effective manner the final decision to the campus constituency influenced by that decision (persuasion, reasoning, public relations).

In the past, the availability (abundance) of resources precluded the difficult and complex decisions now required. During those days mistakes were more or less covered with more money or people. Few questions were raised. Today, under threat of program reduction, faculty retrenchment, cost-accounting, and mushrooming legal intrusions, each decision is carefully reviewed. The author has seen in the last year a simple and apparently innocuous administrative decision turn a campus into a pitched battle between faculty and administrators that would never have occurred five (maybe three) years ago. Obviously, in such climates the importance of an effective communication system cannot be overstated.

Three Unique Problem Areas The Educational Consultant Faces

Once the individual decides to consult (whether he or she solicits the contact or is invited) on the campus, three problem areas arise that are unique to this type of organization. To be effective, the consultant must be aware of these problems and properly respond. The problems are: entering the organization, collecting data, and strategizing change with the organization. Each area is explained in the following sections.

Entering the Educational Organization

The initial contact between the consultant and client is important to the possibility of a project. In this stage, the two parties attempt to accomplish several objectives: definition of problem, set of problems, or intended scope of problem identification; assessment of client (consultant); assessment of client resources (consultant skills); and prospects for a mutually satisfactory project. Throughout this stage the two parties are constantly clarifying their perspectives as they achieve these objectives. Three elements of this process are highlighted in terms of their relevance to educational institutions.

"If You'll Believe in Me," said the Unicorn, "I'll Believe in You." The conditions under which the consultant enters the organization are critical to the success of the project. This, in and of itself, is not unique to consulting in educational organizations. What is unique is that the college may not be able to clearly define its expectations for the project. Too often colleges operate from poorly defined goals and objectives. They have difficulty expressing a statement of mission except in the most general of terms and cannot operationalize that mission in terms of functional responsibilities for various units. As depressing as that might appear, it is no less significant to determining the why, what, and who of a consulting project.

Too often the interest in a project is expressed in terms of "better communication." As the communication specialist is so very aware, that ambiguous goal requires a more precise definition and certainly some parameters. The specialist must avoid leaving an open-ended definition afloat on the waves of client expectations. Each person will have a different concept and expectation of results. Each will have a private agenda (possibly public) to be reached through the study.

The consultant at this entry stage must help the client reach an ageed-upon set of parameters and a defined outcome expectation. With whom that is done becomes another issue to be resolved.

The heterogeneous nature of educational institutions presents a number of problems to the consultant. One of the major problems is knowing exactly who will be responsible for the audit. The President or Chancellor will not always centralize that responsibility in his or her office. Disparate and often conflicting advisory groups may be involved but, at least

initially, there will be some ambiguity as to who is responsible. This problem is further confused by a lack of a clearly defined person who would normally handle such activities. In a corporation, the Personnel Manager, Communications Officer, or Human Development Officer is the likely and visible contact. Colleges and universities do not typically have any one of these people assigned to handle this type of activity.

The fragmented nature of educational systems adds further to this confusion. Many units will see themselves as semi-autonomous. The level of the consultant's entry will be important to obtaining a comprehensive audit. Do not believe that because the Personnel Officer (for example) supports the project that that is sufficient to ensure the support of the College of Liberal Arts (for example). The higher up the organization, the more confidence one can have of obtaining a comprehensive study. Even then it is not absolutely assured. Even subgroups across levels of the system will respond as if autonomous to the administrative structure. Probably the most notorious of these groups is the faculty.

"Never a Prophet in Your Own Backyard." While the consultant is studying the organization in these preliminary stages, the organization is studying the consultant. Trust, credibility, and competence are being evaluated and judgments are being formed. For the educational consultant, these can be difficult times. The ability to relate to subgroups in the organization are tested. The awareness of problems facing education are examined. The ability to articulate the language of the academy is scrutinized.

Since most communication consultants come from the academy, this becomes an opportunistic venture that can facilitate entry to the research setting. If the consultant is properly prepared, is familiar with the assorted issues in higher education, and does not project a parochial attitude toward administrators, faculty, or staff, then acceptance is not automatically denied. However, if the consultant appears to be identified too closely with schools of educational administration then credibility becomes more suspect. This author's experience suggests that college clients are more impressed with (and find more credible) those credentials that include a list of previous corporate clients than one with only college or university clients. To the contrary, corporate clients generally expect and respect credentials displaying work with similar types of corporations.

"Never a Profit in Your Own Backyard." If the prospect of making lots of money is the potential consultant's motivation for entering the educational consulting market, then the trip will

be paved with disappointments. If there is one sensitive issue on the campus it is payments to outside consultants. The ability of the consultant to avoid such issues is not only a test of his or her rhetorical training but an important step to a successful project.

The people on campus will want to know the nature of the financial arrangement. Faculty in particular will raise the question. They will also want to know the source of the funds. It is not unusual to hear comparisons between the dollars spent on the project and the lack of adequate faculty salaries. The author experienced one coincidence where the faculty raised quite a storm over a $500 project that was externally funded while he was simultaneously involved in a $250,000 direct-cost corporate project in which the issue of funding was barely mentioned. There is no end to the way academic clients worry about funding and the justification of funding.

The sooner the consultant addresses the issue of money the better. One sure way is to seek outside funding sources. Communication scholars have had good success with attracting external funding. Some agencies and sources who have shown interest in funding projects similar to campus-based communication studies are: Title III support to higher education, Kellogg Foundation, Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, National Institute for Education, Office of Naval Research, and the Ford Foundation.

Obviously, entry is an important step to establishing a productive consultant-client relationship. The nature of the educational organization presents some difficult problems for the consultant that require different strategies than for corporate clients.

Collecting Data Within the Educational Organization

The process of data collection is the most significant activity undertaken by the consultant. How the consultant approaches this activity, the care taken to control the environment under study, and the methodology used are all elements that must be responded to in terms of the type of organization. Educational institutions require attention to each of these in ways different from other types of organizations. These differences are explained in the following sections.

Choice of Models. The perspective used by the consultant in approaching the research problem controls the outcome. The traditional method is to select (often intuitively) a traditional management model as a foundation. For educational organizations,

this is not only an insufficient but misleading technique. As an example, the ICA Communication Audit uses a set of instruments developed from management models appropriate for tightly managed corporate structures. The Audit presumes from its parent models a particular type of leadership structure. Neither of these characteristics is an appropriate point of departure for colleges and universities as a priori value sets.

The educational consultant is required to look at models more appropriately defined for North American colleges. Suggested foundational models for the consultant would include those from Balderston,[3] Baldridge and others,[4] Blau,[5] Cohen and March,[6] and Mayhew.[7] These models generally suggest a participative leadership model in which deliberate ambiguity characterizes the top echelon. The central management core is more in a care-taker role depending on the need for tight management practices. The system tends to be deliberately reactive. Only on rare occasions will it take a proactive strategy.

Beyond foundational models of management structure come models, or schemes, for conducting consultation. Among the better utilized schemes are consulcube by Blake and Mouton,[8] the Dennis Feedback and Prescribed Action Model, and Schein's process consultation techniques.[10] The consultant needs to constantly weave the various process models through the fabric of the educational management models. The tapestry created will be in form and texture the methodology for the consultation project. It is obviously important, albeit an often neglected detail, that this tapestry is carefully considered, evaluated, and judged suitable for the type of organization. This is particularly true for educational organizations.

Techniques of Data Collecting. The usual methodological approaches to collecting data are acceptable and the typical precautions are to be followed. The collection process in educational organizations may differ from other organizations in at least three ways: the communication consultant as observer-as-participant, the heterogeneous nature of the population, and the influence of the calendar.

Because the typical communication consultant comes from an extensive experience with educational organization, he or she enters the client's field with some facility. This consultant knows the "trade language", is familiar with the ways of the members, and can interpret "their world." He or she is able to discount misinformation and understands structural arrangements

that often have no counterparts in other types of organizations.[11] On the other hand he or she must avoid too intimate of identification, particularly with subgroups. The consultant operates as an observer-as-participant role type in the field and can be a victim of mistaken perceptions which create credibility problems he or she may not even be aware of until too late.[12] It is useful, whenever on a campus, to employ techniques to constantly monitor perceptions of the consulting project.

The heterogeneous nature of the population under study was mentioned earlier as a problem for entering the campus. It is a continuing problem during the data collection stage. The disjointed semi-autonomous nature of units requires considerable coordination efforts in conducting a comprehensive audit. More briefing sessions and follow-through will be needed to assure that groups understand the audit and participate in sufficient numbers.

In large systems, the structure may even preclude a single audit. One of the author's current clients has arranged a "layered" approach to the audit where different combinations of units and different management layers of the campus are studied in separate and distinct audits. Once this is completed, the parts are assembled. This is necessary because of the complex structure, size, and difficulty in controlling a proper research climate for a single audit.

A second type of problem arising from the heterogeneous nature of the population is the wide range of formal education by the participants. The range will be from Ph.D.'s to the illiterate. If the consultant uses large group settings for questionnaire administration, it will not be unusual to have sophisticated questions about methodological procedures used in the study followed by requests to have someone read questions for those who cannot read. This has implications for questionnaire construction as well as administration.

The wide differences in perspectives of the groups will compound the problem. Questions relevant for faculty will be very different from those relevant to the staff. Even terminology will differ. Staff may be very comfortable with the terms "boss," "immediate supervisor," and "management." Faculty on the other hand will find such references annoying, if not distasteful. They may not even be able to correctly reference who their "boss" is. Staff may find job satisfaction to be extrinsically motivated while faculty will find it intrinsically motivated.

Issues of power and authority will be of interest to faculty but probably not staff. All in all, the consultant is constantly balancing how the data are to be collected and trading off what might be collected because of the logistical difficulties of dealing with the varied population subgroups.

The timing of the study is also important in data collection. All organizations have episodic characteristics but it is the nature of educational institutions to be particularly tied to the calendar. Comprehensive investigations are pointless in the summer months. Data collected in the Fall may reflect "summer euphoria" whereby the regeneration of faculty and the settling of issues through the summer months reflects a more passive and artifically conflict-free environment. In contrast, the late Spring is when the accumulation of frustrations and unresolved issues are at their peak. The most reasonable time frame for conducting the audit, therefore, becomes a narrow band in the calendar between mid-October and early December and early February to mid-April.

Other issues do arise in the data collection stages. The essential ones, however, are choice of models, techniques for dealing with the diverse population group, and timing. Once these problems are resolved, the validity of the data is much improved.

Strategizing Change With the Educational Organization

One of the final stages in the consulting project is strategizing change. This assumes that the results of the data collection are sets of problems and these warrant change. (It is certainly worth saying at this point that it is entirely possible that no problems will emerge that deserve change. It must be the nature of consultants to always find an appropriate number of problems----the author has also not been an exception). The method of strategizing change with the client is an important element in the process. There are two areas of concern for the consultant in this stage: employing effective techniques for introducing strategies and assuring that the client has ownership of the strategy at the end.

The consultant enters the relationship as a third party interventionist. Throughout this discussion, the problems of that role have been mentioned. The advantages, however, emerge when strategizing change. The third party enters the discussion of planning change free from the constraints of institutional history (which like the ivy on the walls, can cover the issues that should be discussed) and without conflict of interest to protect any given party.

Suggestions and plans can flow freely. It is the responsibility of the consultant to establish a climate for ideas. The third party brings to the client an expertise in the area of contention as well as intimate knowledge of the particular problem. The third party communication consultant also brings expertise in conducting group processing sessions. This is the time to utilize all of those skills.

The consultant will find it useful to have at hand and be able to adopt change-oriented strategies with the group. The circumstances of the group and the problem will dictate the particular strategy. A body of literature has begun to emerge suggesting strategies useful in educational organizations.[13] Along with such strategies must be included tactics for change. Here again, the educational consultant must respect such variables as timing, change obstacles, agenda, and politics of the campus.

The implementation of strategies depends a great deal upon the role the consultant sees for him or herself. The role of "advocate" is different from "client-centered helper." Another role possible would be "change agent." Each role brings with it a point of view for strategizing with the client.[14] The effective consultant will recognize the need to adapt roles much as he or she adapts suggested strategies depending on the client and the problem. For educational institutions, it is difficult to predict an ideal role or strategy.

Regardless of the role or the strategy, the consultant is always wise to not confuse being an expert on how to help an organization to learn about its communication problems with being an expert on the actual management problems which the organization is expected to solve.[15] The consultant must retain perspective. He or she must also assure that ownership of the problem stays with the organization.

Too often the consultant becomes so consumed by the problem and strategies that he or she forgets who must really ultimately deal with that problem. It is often frustrating to observe the various client subgroups debate, argue, or even ignore important issues. The consultant wants to get into the fray with the divine answer. Yet, in educational institutions the ultimate answer is more likely to be based on who benefits from the solution and not what are the benefits of the solution. In the former, only the group can decide and often that decision depends on acquiring influential sponsors. As Lindquist has noted, "without such determined advocates, the status quo powers will defeat any change attempt."[16] And the consultant should remember that it is very

rare for that advocate to be the President. Consequently, strategizing takes time, is heavily political, cannot be rushed, and cannot be owned by the outside consultant.

Summary

The process of consultation is systematic. It requires careful preparation even prior to the first stage and continued preparation through each stage of the project. It is an exciting and challenging activity. For the communication scholar it encourages use of all of his or her skills and training (research, persuasion, interpersonal, group decision-making, interviewing skills and numerous others). In many ways, that training advantages the communication scholar for entering into consultation.

Yet that training is insufficient for consultation in educational institutions. Marshall McLuhan once remarked, "we shape our tools then our tools shape us." Consultation in educational institutions require differently shaped tools. One must respect the unique features of the organization and properly respond to their unusual structures, habits, and quaint customs.

FOOTNOTES

[1]All three are in mid-western institutions. The first was an urban state-supported university in 1976. The second was of a church-affiliated college in 1979. The third was of a church-related college in 1980. All other known audits have been of departments within institutions rather than of the entire institution.

[2]John D. Millett, New Structures of Campus Power (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc., 1978), 222.

[3]F.E. Balderston, Managing Today's University (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc., 1974).

[4]J. Victor Baldridge, and others, Policy Making and Effective Leadership (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc., 1978).

[5]Peter Blau, The Organization of Academic Work (New York: John Wiley, 1973).

[6]Michael Cohen and James March, Leadership and Ambiguity (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

[7]Lewis Mayhew, Surviving the Eighties (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979).

[8]R.R. Blake and J.S. Mouton, Consultation (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishers, 1976).

[9]Harry Dennis, "The Construction of a Managerial Communication Climate Inventory for Use in Complex Organizations." International Communication Conference, Chicago, 1975.

[10]E. Schein, Process Consultation (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishers, 1969).

[11]Jeffery Riemer, "Varieties of Opportunistic Research," Urban Life 5 (January, 1977), 467-477.

[12]Raymond Gold, "Roles in Sociological Field Observations," Social Forces 36(March, 1958), 217-223.

[13]S.V. Martorana and E. Kuhns, Managing Academic Change (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975), 162-167.

[14]Daniel Pilon and William Bergquist, Consultation in Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges, 1979), 69-77.

[15]Schein, p. 120.

[16]Jack Lundquist, Strategies for Change (Berkeley, California: Pacific Soundings Press, 1978), 8.